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# Discerning the 'Body'

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*Text: 1 Corinthians 11:17–34*

Now, there's an unusual situation, you might say:  
Here in Corinth in the mid-50s of the first century, look at  
what's happening:

You have followers of Christ arguing and disputing with one  
another.

Taking sides. Not getting along with one another.

Whoever heard of that happening in a church?

Here's something else: in this young church in Corinth  
you've got what we moderns call social inequities:  
the well-off having no regard for the not-so-well-off.

What is happening is that the well-off get off  
work early, or maybe they don't have to work at all.

So they come to the Christian assembly in late  
afternoon or so, and they bring their sumptuous  
dinners—their gourmet deli food, so to speak—  
along with a generous supply of wine, probably  
pretty choice wine. And they eat and drink.

And eat and drink.

By evening when the not-so-well-off get off work  
and drag their weary bodies to the gathering,  
carrying their brown bags with their paltry  
suppers, or even coming empty-handed,  
what they see is a merry assemblage  
of well-fed and well-drunk members

of the body of Christ.  
And these not-well-off must be asking themselves,  
Do I really belong here? Am I really a member  
of this body?

Whoever heard of something like that happening in a church:

social differences that pit the in's against  
the out's,  
that push some members to the margins  
while making a core group feel good  
about itself?

Who would have thought it—could this have been happening  
in early Christianity, only twenty-some years removed from  
Jesus' death?

It does look like this young church in Corinth, founded  
by one of the apostles himself, was not so different  
from churches today.

Isn't that rather distressing, one might ask:  
If we can't take the early church as a model,  
who then?  
It's enough to make one despair.

Or—maybe it could give us reason to hope,  
to cause us to lift up our hearts.

Do you see why?

Because if those early followers were a lot like us,  
then what Paul says to them in this letter might speak  
to us today as well.

What he says might help us to live together  
as members of the body of Christ,  
in this place and this time.

Let's begin by looking at those words, "the body of Christ".

You won't find that way of describing the church in the  
four New Testament gospels,  
or in the book of Acts,  
or the Book of Revelation.

It's one of the terms that the apostle Paul uses to  
describe those little groups that assembled in the name  
of Jesus

in Corinth and Philippi and Thessalonica and other  
cities in Greece and what is today Turkey.

Another term he applies to them in our text is "the  
church of God".

Now if you think of those people in Corinth we've just been  
talking about, those seem like rather grandiose terms to  
apply to *them*. But maybe there is more to them than  
meets the eye. At least Paul seems to think so.

When he looks at them he sees something we might not  
see or that they themselves might not perceive.

For Paul, those terms—"the body of Christ" and  
"the church of God"—imply that something has  
happened to those people in Corinth.

In his letters he has various ways of expressing that:  
—you have passed from darkness to life, he tells  
his readers;

—you belong to the day, not the night;  
—once you were dead, now you are alive;  
—you are a new creation.

What all this means is that when those followers of  
Christ assemble there in Corinth, they are something  
different from what they once were:

they are the church of God in that place, which in  
Paul's language means they are God's people,  
set apart for God's purposes.

So, what is it that brings us together here this evening?

We may have hobbies,  
     but I don't think it's stamp collecting or bird-  
     watching or euchre that brought us here.  
 We have political loyalties, or we may belong to  
 a union,  
     but I'm quite sure neither of those commitments  
     brought us here.  
 Aren't we here, rather, because something happened to  
 us too:  
     because we've been baptized into the church of God,  
     into the body of Christ?

If you read on in this letter, to the next chapter, you'll find a long passage in which Paul reminds these early Christians how a body functions.

There were surgeons in Paul's day, but we don't really know if Paul knew what modern medicine and modern surgery have taught us:

—that you can live without an appendix or a gall bladder or a thryoid, and that sometimes you are much better off without a particular member if it's diseasing the rest of the body, impairing its functioning.

But it's still better, of course, to have all your parts healthy and in working order.

And so Paul is not off the mark when he stresses that every part is vital to a healthy body,

they all have to be working together.

But that's not happening in Corinth, and so the body is sick.

Indeed, the bodies of individual members of Christ's body in Corinth are sick, as Paul says in our text: "many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (11:30).

But these sick people, this sick body that is the church of

God at Corinth, know enough to turn to the doctor.

They write a letter to the founder of their church—  
to Paul—and they describe their symptoms.

Now, try to put yourself in Paul's shoes.

What are you going to prescribe?

Are you going to be angry?

Are you going to scold?

Or just what are you going to do?

Paul does get angry, yes.

He scolds, yes. He says:

Look, if you want to gorge yourselves—and  
drink yourselves under the table—you've got  
houses where you can do that.

But, my Lord, don't do it when you gather at the Lord's  
table.

Don't do it when you assemble as the church of God.

So Paul scolds (I don't know about you, but I don't think  
I'd want him as my next-door neighbour).

But there's one thing you always have to remember about  
Paul:

He almost never *just* scolds.

Right in the middle of his scolding here in our text  
look how he slips in some very revealing words:

When you despise one another at your meals it  
isn't the *Lord's* supper that you eat,  
because when you humiliate those who have  
nothing to eat you are despising the church  
of God.

In scolding them he is already pointing to that new  
reality that they are but don't perceive that they are:

they—these bickering, disregarding people—are  
God's gathering in Corinth,  
the church of God in Corinth,  
set apart for God's purposes.

And therefore—therefore—the meals they eat  
together are supposed to be the *Lord's* supper.



Ah, but they're not. For some their meals together are just an occasion for eating and drinking their fill.

For others they are cause for humiliation.

And so at this point Paul introduces a little story.

It's a story that we here assembled have heard hundreds of times.

And just because of that, it tends to glide by us. We tend not to hear it.

For those new Christians in Corinth, however, it was a story they had heard once from Paul, maybe twice (11:23) but maybe not since. You see it's a story about Jesus, and the gospels that record stories about Jesus were not yet written when Paul was writing this letter to the Corinthian Christians in the mid-fifties of the first century.

Here's the story. As I read it, maybe try to imagine you are hearing it only for the second or third time, like those Christians in our text:

*1 Corinthians 11:23-26*

That little story tells what the Lord's supper is.

The Lord's supper is a meal that has to do with Christ's death

—his giving his body to be broken and his blood to be poured out. He gives his body so that those people in Corinth—and elsewhere—might be his body in the world,

set apart for his purposes.

Christ sheds his blood so they might be the church of God in the world.

And here is where another story, a sad story, enters in:

In the centuries since then, Christians—

for whom Christ shed his blood—  
 have shed the blood of other Christians,  
 arguing about the meaning of those words,  
 "This is my body," "This is my blood."  
 Roman Catholics versus Lutherans,  
 Lutherans versus Catholics,  
 Lutherans versus Reformed Christians,  
 Reformed Christians versus Lutherans,  
 Lutherans versus Lutherans.

And so on.

All of them fought one another—from the pulpit,  
 across the back fence, on the printed page and on the  
 battlefield. Fighting—over a meal that each and all  
 of them called the Lord's meal  
 and yet claimed for themselves to the  
 exclusion of others.

It seems to me that in all their wrangling and fighting over  
 the Lord's supper they did not see something that Paul saw  
 in Corinth:

despite all the fighting and factions and failings  
 there,

despite all that,  
 nonetheless, when Paul looked at those people in  
 Corinth,

he saw there the body of Christ.

But the people who over the centuries were at each  
 other's throats over those words in the eucharist—

"This is my body"—seem to have missed that.  
 They looked at the bread in the eucharist and insisted  
 that it had been turned into the actual body of Christ.

Or they insisted that Christ was present in that  
 bread and the eating of it but the bread had not  
 turned into actual body. Or they said the bread  
 signified—symbolized, stood for—the body of  
 Christ.

But what did they not do?

They did not look across the battle-lines and see



there—in those followers of Christ on the other side of the eucharistic battlefield—the body of Christ.

They fought about the body in the bread—  
or not in the bread—

and didn't discern the body of Christ in their fellow members.

Now, you notice that in our text Paul doesn't spend any time explaining *how* the bread could be the body of Christ.

Listen to what he does say: *1 Corinthians 11:29*

“discerning the body”: the Corinthian Christians were not discerning the body of Christ.

Those who had plenty to eat and drink didn't see their fellow believers who had little or nothing to eat and drink,

and they didn't see how their own behaviour was excluding those have-nots. They didn't see in them the body of Christ.

And the have-nots were having a hard time seeing the body of Christ in that merry assembly of eaters and drinkers.

And neither group remembered that it was the *Lord's* supper,

not their own private group meal.

So both groups needed to listen to the little story Paul tells about Jesus breaking the bread—

and passing the cup around to his disciples—

on the night before he went to his death.

That is the kind of meal the Lord's supper is: a time when the body of Christ gathers around the body of Christ in the bread,

in remembrance of his death,

until he comes,

as we repeat after Paul  
in our communion liturgy.

A strange thing, we might remark, for Paul to be saying:  
Is not this the guy who made a sport of hunting down  
followers of Christ?

Indeed, yes.

But after the Lord appeared to Paul and called  
Paul to his service, Paul was instructed by his  
fellow believers.

That is what he is saying when he introduces the little  
story of the breaking of the bread and the passing of  
the cup:

Paul says he is passing on to the Corinthian  
Christians what he also received from the Lord  
through his fellow believers. The words he  
uses—"received from the Lord"—are technical  
terms in Greek for the passing on of tradition.

Someone told Paul about Jesus' meal with his  
followers.

And now Paul was telling Jesus' followers  
in Corinth.

And they told it to others.

And they to others.

And finally someone told  
it to us.

It is fitting that we tell it again this Lenten-tide.

And when we do so we are receiving from a long  
line of believers reaching all the way back  
to Paul,

and behind him to the anonymous Christian  
who told it to him.

And when we come forward to the Lord's table to  
receive bread and wine at the hands of our  
fellow believer,

we are receiving from the Lord, for it is the  
Lord's table.

Now, let me tell a story of my own.

As I was thinking about this text and this sermon  
I thought back to my young and venturesome days  
when I spent a couple of years in Geneva,  
Switzerland,

working as an editor and translator for the  
Lutheran World Federation.

The office of the Federation was located right next to  
the office of the World Presbyterian and  
Reformed Alliance,

next to the office of Brethren Christians,  
and the offices of other Christian confessions.

All of us were situated on a beautiful wooded plot of  
ground

—right in town—

graced by a beautiful old Swiss chalet that  
housed the offices of the World Council  
of Churches.

Every afternoon there was tea,  
served either in the chalet

or, in nice weather, on the lawn in front  
of it.

There would gather Anglicans (maybe that's why we  
had tea),

Presbyterians,

Lutherans,

Baptists,

Christians from many different countries and  
many different backgrounds,

even a Greek Orthodox priest who is today  
head of the Greek Orthodox Church in  
North America.

As we ate and drank together there, after so many  
centuries of Christian conflict and warfare,

we were able to discern the body of Christ  
in that place.

The world has almost unbelievably changed since those days.

Christians today are much more ready to look across denominational lines and see fellow believers there,  
to discern the body of Christ there.

But now we are much more aware of other dividing lines:  
we see on the TV screen followers of other religions in distant lands. They are our neighbours,  
and they sit next to us in classes,  
or next to our children or grandchildren in their classes.

Canadian soldiers fought alongside them or faced them across battlelines in the Gulf.

During that war our bishop, William Huras, looked forward to the end of the war and addressed a Lenten pastoral letter to us all. This is part of what he wrote:

In building peace, we need to remember the human face of war. Many very ordinary people will be killed, wounded, or become prisoners or refugees.... We must guard against the danger of making these people faceless and nameless victims of some distant war. They remain valued people in the eyes of their Creator. They remain loved fathers and mothers, treasured daughters and sons, cherished parents and children for other people known to them. Within the global family, they are our neighbours. (Pastoral Letter on the Crisis in the Middle East, Lent 1991).

So, we have new lessons to learn in our time, a changed time from 50, 40, 30, 20, even only 10 years ago—lessons about how to live with persons who have different religious loyalties than we do

but nonetheless share a common humanity with us.

We need to learn to discern our common humanity even while we remain

faithful members of the body of Christ.

The story of his passion and death,

where he gives himself for others,  
and the story of the meal he shared with his  
disciples before his death,  
and the meal itself,  
these stories and that meal can help us to do so.